THE POSITION OF PROMISES OF REWARD IN THE MORAL TEACHING OF THE GOSPEL.

St. Matthew xix. 16–xx. 16.

The manner in which the moral exhortations of our Lord are coupled with assurances of reward has at all times engaged much attention, and seems of late to have been a stumbling-block to many minds. In considering it, we may with advantage commence by recalling the parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard (St. Matt. xx. 1–16), which, with its context, seems to embody the substance of our Lord's teaching on the subject. It is essential to consider it in relation to the incident which had preceded it, and which gave occasion for it. We read that one came unto our Lord, and said unto Him: "What good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?" Jesus said unto him: "Keep the commandments;" such as, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal; and, in a word, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. The young man said unto Him: "All these have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?" Jesus said unto him, "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me. But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions." On which our Lord took occasion to observe to his disciples how hard it is for those who have riches, or as He elsewhere expressed it, for those who trust in riches, to enter into the kingdom of heaven. Eternal life was, in the Young Man's eyes, a reward or wage to be received in payment for some obedience or

sacrifice; and the sacrifice which our Lord demanded of him seemed unreasonable. He was not prepared to surrender everything for our Lord's sake, and at his command. Upon this, St. Peter eagerly reminds our Saviour that he and the other Apostles had forsaken all, and had followed Him, and enquires: "What shall we have therefore?" The answer is in striking contrast with the severity with which our Lord had simply urged on the Young Man the sacrifices he must make. Jesus said unto them, "Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit on the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, shall receive an hundred-fold, and shall inherit everlasting life. But," He adds, "many that are first shall be last; and the last first." And then follows the parable in question.

The connection of thought is natural and striking. It would almost seem as though our Lord at first repelled, with a certain generous energy, the doubt which Peter's question appeared to raise, whether the reward of his faithful followers would be adequate to their sacrifices. He promises at once a more than ample return for any such sacrifice; as though he would have none think that they would in any respect be the losers, or that they could be making any real sacrifice in his service. Peter spoke almost as though he were placing his Master under some obligation by forsaking all and following Him. Such is the tone of the enquiry, "What shall we have therefore?" But our Lord makes him feel that the obligation was all on the other side; and that, if the relation between Him and his disciples were to be measured, in any way, by a comparison of the mutual benefits received, they were infinitely his debtors. They should receive an hundred-fold,

and should have everlasting life. But having thus made it plain, first, by his answer to the Young Man, that an unlimited and unreserved self-surrender is demanded from those who would follow Him, and receive the eternal life He offers them; and secondly, by his answer to Peter, that He would reward any such self-surrender an hundredfold; He proceeds, in the parable, to obviate the supposition that the reward must needs be related to the service rendered in the proportion of an exact equivalent, so that it could be a matter of bargain or strict right. The relation of the King of Heaven to his subjects is that of a generous master, and not of a mere employer. He is benevolent and considerate, as well as strictly just; and the rewards of his service are bestowed, not only as wages, but as gifts. Because a man may have had fewer opportunities of serving Him than another, it does not follow that He will be less bountiful to him. In the exercise of his benevolence, He will do as He will with his own; and no one has a right to be envious because He is generous. In a word, the moral relations of men to God, in the kingdom of heaven, involve unreserved surrender on their part, and abundant reward on his; and, at the same time, a distribution of those rewards not necessarily dependent on the actual amount of service which has been rendered, but on the free exercise of God's good will, having regard to the varying circumstances of those towards whom it is called forth. There may thus be many cases in which the first shall be as the last, and the last as the first; so that, in the great final account, men's rewards and merits may often be reduced to a far greater equality than would be supposed by them in the midst of their struggles and their rivalry on earth.

Such seems the general teaching of the Parable; and it must be our guide in dealing with the question under consideration—a question which it is of the highest import-

ance to the depth and freedom of our spiritual life that we should thoroughly appreciate. There can be no question that promises of reward, such as those here given to Peter, occupy a very prominent place in the exhortations of our Lord and in the preaching of the Apostles. The Sermon on the Mount starts with promises of blessing; it bids Christians rejoice when they are persecuted for righteousness' sake, because great is their reward in heaven; it holds out, as our constant encouragement, the assurance that our Father, who sees in secret, will reward us openly; and it concludes with the declaration that the faithful Christian will be found to have built his house upon the rock. Elsewhere the faithful servant of the kingdom of heaven is compared to one who trades skilfully with his lord's talents. For the tone of the Apostles, it is interesting to recall the opening of the First Epistle of St. Peter, the very Apostle who asked the question, and who received the assurance, we have been considering. "Blessed," he exclaims, "be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which, according to his abundant mercy, hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you." But thoughts akin to these were not less potent in the mind of St. Paul. He describes Christians as having entered into a contest in which they look forward to a prize; and so, at the close of his life, he exclaims to Timothy, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, or race, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day; and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing."

Now these exhortations to Christian duty, and this aspect of Christian life, have occasioned difficulties of two distinct classes. In the first place, in proportion as Christian souls

have realized their own unworthiness, they have been inclined to shrink from language which seems to imply that they can receive anything from God in the nature of a reward. These feelings correspond to our Lord's words, "So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which was our duty to do." Similarly, some of the divines to whom we owe the great blessing of a firm grasp of the doctrine of our forgiveness and salvation by God's free grace, through faith, and not for our works or deservings, have exhibited a certain hesitation in dwelling on such free and full assurances of reward as we have been reviewing; as though they might be misinterpreted too easily into countenancing some doctrine of merits, and of reliance upon good works. On the other hand, it has been often urged as an objection to the whole moral teaching of the Gospel, that it incites men to the pursuit of righteousness for the mere sake of reward, for some selfish or ulterior purpose; whereas no man can be really righteous unless he loves righteousness for its own sake, independent of its consequences. There are earnest writers on ethical questions in the present day by whom this objection is felt; and the feeling out of which it arises is one of the noblest and truest, and, let it be added, one of the oldest and deepest in human nature. One of the most beautiful of Greek plays, the Hippolytus of Euripides, illustrates how a man who, by his very virtue, is defeated in the chief aspiration of his life, who is dying in misery, and who has no existence of conscious blessedness to look forward to, nevertheless receives, in the honour of such a death, a deep and noble satisfaction. Thus, while on the one side it is felt that men can never merit any rewards at the hands of God, it is felt, on the other, that those rewards should not be their main motives; and the question arises, how the tone of the Gospel teaching in this respect

is to be harmonized with the purest theology on the one hand, and with the most sensitive morality on the other.

The explanation will, perhaps, best be discerned if we observe that a similar difficulty, or, we might say, delicacy of feeling, arises in the ordinary relations of life. Consider the case of love, or friendship, between two persons. Such relations are felt to be degraded—they cease in fact really to exist—when the motive of attachment on either side is merely that of personal and mutual advantage. Love which is not, in this sense, disinterested is not love; and men despise a man who affects friendship for a powerful neighbour for the mere sake of what can be obtained from him. But, on the other hand, it is part of the essence of such relations that there should be a return, and a generous return, on the part of friends for the love or the friendship which is bestowed. No doubt, one of the most beautiful feelings is love which is bestowed without any possibility of return; but, none the less, where it is possible that the love, the friendship, or the kindness should be returned, there it ought to be returned; and there is an incompleteness, a maimed and unsatisfied character, about mutual relations where such mutual benefits are not interchanged. But what deserves more particular observation is, that the nature of this relationship is much more easily felt than expressed. The beauty of any such relation between man and man, or between man and woman, would be at once marred, if the love, or the benefit, which the one could bestow on the other were put forward as constituting anything like a formal claim, so as to transform the relation into one of mere exchange; but yet who would not be ashamed if, in point of fact, he made no adequate return for the love or the kindness bestowed on him? The return must come from a free heart; and the love must be given on the one side for the same reason that it is given on the other, without calculation of proportionate benefits, or

regard to anything but the indulgence of the love itself. But it must be given on both sides, if the relation is to be complete; and no generous mind would accept the devotion of another without thus giving all it could in return, and pouring out on one who loves it the riches of its own love, and of all it can bestow. This is the essence of the relationship of persons, as distinguished from the mere commercial or legal relations of exchange. Its exact bearings cannot be put into strict language, and it sometimes seems to vanish under definition; but we all know that in its realization consists the chief charm of family and social life. In proportion as such life is transformed into one general habit of giving, does it become blessed and lovely. In proportion as every one feels that it is more blessed to give than to receive, every one is giving and every one is receiving; but the sense of giving overpowers that of receiving; and the more generous the soul, the more it offers and the more it gives.

Now in order to apply these considerations to the question before us, we have only to observe that the very purpose of the Gospel is to transform our relation to God into a personal relation, similar to those which prevail among ourselves. He is our Father, and his Son our Brother; and He offers to dwell with us, and to commune with us, as a man with his friend. It is this which constitutes the essential difference between the Law and the Gospel. The characteristic feature of the position of those who were in covenant with God before Christ came was, that their relations with Him were in great measure subject to the rule of strict and formal law. It was, indeed, possible for them, as is seen in the case of the Patriarchs, to rise in faith and hope above this legal relation, and to look forward to that free position of sonship which was afterwards to be established. But, in St. Paul's phrase, before faith came, "we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which

should afterwards be revealed." God stood in some measure apart from men, having laid down fixed rules for his service and worship; and men approached Him under these legal conditions. Perhaps, in his awful majesty and unapproachable holiness, as a Spirit dwelling in light, whom no man could approach unto, He was too far removed from human thought and human sympathy for personal relationship with Him to be generally possible. But this difficulty was removed by the incarnation of his Son, and by the atonement offered by Him; and, from the moment that God was made flesh and dwelt among us, the way has been opened for men to live in a communion with Him and with his Son similar to that which they maintain between themselves and their fellows. Henceforth, every obligation of man to God, and every relation of God to man, ceases to be one of legal tenure and of formal justice; it becomes one of free equity, and bears all the unrestrained and self-determining character of love.

It would seem that nothing is so important as this for us to bear in mind, if we would appreciate the characteristic doctrines of the Gospel. It would not, perhaps, be too much to say, that every perversion of them, and every misconception of them, arises from their being translated from this personal character into one of formal relations. Take, for instance, the vicarious sacrifice of our Lord. Transform it into the shape of what may be called vicarious exchange; let it be represented, as it so often has been in formal theology, as a legal transaction, by which a penalty is transferred from one victim to another, and it may revolt our sense of justice. But regard it as a personal act of self-sacrifice, similar in kind to that which is every day performed by husbands and wives, by friends, and in a conspicuous degree by soldiers, and it is seen that the doctrine does but bring into our relations with God and Christ one of the deepest and most sacred of human relationships.

The case is similar with the doctrine of justification by faith. Let faith be, as it were, legalized; let it be represented as a mere act of obedience, such as were the acts prescribed under the old law, and our forgiveness and justification by it may appear arbitrary, and may seem to lose sight of the necessary moral conditions of salvation. But let it be regarded as the personal surrender of the soul to a personal God of all truth and righteousness; and then St. Paul's proclamation that "now the righteousness of God, without law,"—apart from law—"is manifested," becomes a declaration that God henceforth deals with us, through Christ, on those generous principles of mutual love which govern the highest personal relationship. God loves us individually, as united to Christ, and as loved by Him; and henceforth we are lifted into a relation to Him in which all the impulses and movements of love, and mercy, and generosity, of the highest equity and justice, have free play between us, untrammelled by any legal or formal conditions.

It will now be easy to apply these considerations to those promises of reward and blessing which are so freely offered by our Lord in the Gospels. If we were to regard Him, as is sometimes done, as merely proclaiming a moral law and giving it the requisite sanctions, the question might assume a different character; though, even then, there would be much to be said on the necessity, as a mere matter of justice, of a guarantee that, in the end, obedience to his commands will be adequately rewarded and disobedience to them adequately punished. But it would be to treat the question very imperfectly if we were to dwell merely on this aspect of it, for the characteristic of our Lord's gracious language is the assurance it gives us that righteousness will be far more than adequately rewarded, that blessing will be poured upon his faithful people in an abundance beyond their utmost conceptions; so that eye hath not seen, nor

ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive the things which God hath prepared for them who love Him. But consider Him not as a legislator, or a moral teacher only, but as the Son of God, coming to us in his Father's name, to proclaim his Father's love, to win our hearts to Him, and to establish us in the relation of sons to our Father in heaven; and what other tone would become Him than one of unbounded love, generosity, bountifulness, and mercy, on the part of his God and our God? He came to make on us an immense demand, to ask of us the devotion of our whole heart, and soul, and mind, and strength; would it have become Him—would it, at least, have been compatible with a relation of love and friendship between God and ourselves—if, while making such a demand, He had not assured us that God, on his part, was desirous of pouring out on us all the riches of his grace, and righteousness, and truth? God comes before us as a living Person, asking us to transform our whole existence into a life of perpetual giving to Him—to act towards Him, as well as towards others, on the principle that it is more blessed to give than to receive. How could He make the request—we need not shrink from enquiring—unless He presented Himself to us in the same character, as always more ready to hear than we to pray, wont to give more than either we desire or deserve, and thus enabling our Lord to appeal to us by this Divine example, and to exhort us to be perfect even as our Father which is in heaven is perfect? If it could be conceived possible that one of ourselves should ask the whole devotion of another person, without offering our own love and devotion and utmost benefits—I will not say in return, but—at the same time, we may then conceive it possible that our Saviour could have addressed men in a tone of less unrestricted and abundant generosity. It would be a sordid mind which saw, in the offer of generous love and devotion on the part of another, an appeal to selfish or

mercenary considerations; and to take any such view of the promises of rewards and blessings held out in the Gospel is —when once the relation assumed by our Lord is perceived —an equal instance of a sordid and unworthy spirit. It is precisely because all such considerations are excluded from the new relation in which our Lord came to place us, precisely because we henceforth stand towards God, not in a formal, but in a living and loving, a friendly and a child-like relation, that He speaks to us without reserve of the bounty and the blessing He desires to bestow on us, and shews that He would thus win our love by a display of his own.

We may now perceive the answer to the two classes of difficulties from which we started. In the first place, the doctrine of God rewarding us for our good works is so far from being inconsistent with the truth of our salvation by his free grace, for the sake of Christ alone, that it is at once a necessary consequence of that truth, and entirely dependent on it. It is precisely because, for Christ's sake, God has received us into a relation of love and sonship towards Him, that He is able to deal with us in a manner which is independent of strict considerations of merit, of work done, of remuneration earned. A father encourages his children with rewards, not as an equivalent for what they have done, or for the services they have rendered, but because the mutual relations of personal love imply mutual giving, not according to the merit of the receiver, but according to the bounty of the giver. Similarly, God's gracious and bountiful promises of rewards for our good works are not offers of equivalents, they are assurances of a grace and generosity which are intended to call forth our own, from motives of gratitude; they are an application, in God's own dealings, of the principle "Give, and it shall be given unto you," which is the highest principle of personal relationship. In proportion, therefore, as we

believe that we are freely forgiven, and made the sons of God by adoption and grace, in that proportion are we the more bound, or rather the more privileged, to insist on the gracious truth that our Father in heaven is waiting to return to us a hundred-fold every gift we could offer Him of ourselves, our substance, our labour, or our life. God forbid, indeed, that we should indulge that monstrous perversion, which strikes at the root of this principle of free personal interchange of loving service, that men may accumulate a store of merits which can be drawn on, and applied, as of strict right. Whatever alters the relation between God and man into one of debt, instead of one of grace, destroys the very essence and blessedness of the Gospel. But there is no more noble, stimulating, and inspiriting motive to moral and spiritual energy than that of feeling that we are living under the eye, and in the presence, of a God and Saviour who, of his free love and grace, will return with more and more abundant blessing every effort that proceeds from devotion to Himself, so that "plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, we shall of Him be plenteously rewarded."

A similar reply may be made to the objection which arises on the score of the claim of righteousness to be loved and pursued for its own sake, independent of consequences. It is forgotten, in raising such a difficulty, that the grace and bounty of God, as displayed in the promises and assurances of the Gospel, are themselves the loftiest exhibition of righteousness in the form of love. It is a love which can only pour itself out in response to a love like its own, upon hearts which are reconciled to it, and which love and trust it; and its offer is therefore necessarily expressed in a form which implies this condition. "He that hath my commandments and keepeth them, he it is that loveth Me: and he that loveth Me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him." "If ye keep my com-

mandments, ye shall abide in my love, even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love." But it is dragging all such expressions away from their natural, their human, their living signification, to see in them the offer of a formal and extraneous reward. They exhibit love, righteousness, and truth pouring themselves forth, in order to evoke love, righteousness, and truth in return, as the heavens pour the rain on the earth, to receive it again in grateful returns of vapour and cloud. In a word, it is by the light thrown on them by the person of Christ, and of the God with whom He reconciles and unites us, that the moral teaching and the moral methods of the Gospel must be interpreted. Objections against that teaching and that method are mainly based on the tacit supposition that they are to be understood and applied under the same circumstances as all other moral teaching, and that the men to whom they are addressed remain in their natural condition. But the circumstances are entirely altered by the fact that our Lord and his Father place themselves in that personal relation towards us which we have been considering. The moral position of every man to whom the message of the Gospel is brought is entirely transformed. He exists no longer in purely natural relations; he is introduced to relations which are supernatural. Three Divine persons, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, are introduced into his moral world. He is appealed to by One who is both God and man, but still man; he is thus brought into a new spiritual relationship; and from henceforth every moral obligation, every moral affection, becomes animated, inspired, clothed with flesh and blood and with all the colours of humanity, by appearing as the will of that incarnate Deity, and as sanctioned by his voice. It is frequently forgotten, but should ever be remembered, that it is only in proportion as account is taken of these new facts and realities which are introduced into the Christian's life, that

any judgment can be passed on Christian morality; and, on the other hand, from the Christian's point of view, all moral systems are necessarily imperfect which do not admit those facts and realities as their main determining element. The question whether we stand towards God and Christ in that personal relation which we have been contemplating is the first problem which, since the time of our Lord, a moral philosopher has to consider. If we do, then we are in a relation which transforms all other relations; and moral problems can no longer be adequately considered on a merely natural basis.

Accordingly, that noble instinct of the human heart, the love of righteousness, truth, and goodness for their own sake, receives under the Gospel a transformation which illumines with the purest light of heaven that language of blessing and promise which marks our Lord's exhortations. It is a noble thing to love righteousness, truth, purity, and goodness in themselves—that is to say, in the abstract. But surely it is more noble, more inspiring, more natural, to love them, if the expression may be allowed, in the concrete, in the very substance and personality of Him who is their Author and Source; to regard them as the attributes, the eternal attributes, of an infinitely righteous, true, pure, and holy Person; and to love Him in whom they all subsist with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength. After all, it is to be remembered that righteousness, truth, goodness, and the like, are all abstract expressions—conceptions of the human mind as much as the names of colours, such as whiteness or redness, or of natural qualities, such as gravitation or heat. They do not exist in themselves, but only in persons; they are elements of personal character and life, and it is here alone that they have their reality. Our Lord does not merely, like other moral teachers, exhibit righteousness, truth, and goodness as abstract standards and objects of attainment. But He displays them in his

own character and that of his Father as united in a personal will, and actively operating upon us. We behold them pouring themselves out on us in Him and through Him, at the cost of his own suffering and death. In a word, He exhibits them as all united in that one supreme form of personal life and action which we call love, and which St. Paul describes as the one complete and enduring energy of our moral and spiritual nature. Everything passes away but this; and even though faith and hope abide, they are subordinated to the supreme energy of charity. It is this which is the animating spirit of all our Lord's teaching. He offers love—love which is ever giving, ever blessing, ever rewarding, here and hereafter, all who respond to it, however imperfectly, with a similar love—rewarding them a hundred-fold; here, it may be, not without persecutions and sufferings like his own, though persecutions and sufferings which themselves bring the deepest blessings; and, hereafter, with eternal life. There was no other influence by which the heart of man could be fully won; and, when the heart is thus won for a righteous, a true, a holy, and a living God, all else, all striving after the perfections of that God and Father, must surely follow. In a word, as in the case of the Young Man who came to Him, our Lord does demand everything; as He assured St. Peter, He does give us everything; and, as He declares in the Parable, He gives it not according to our own labours or deservings, but out of his own goodwill, and with a generous regard for all the weaknesses, the ignorances, and the misfortunes of our position. Perfect love could do no less, as perfect love could do no more.

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